

Economy, weather influence protest numbers

AFOSI reminds Wolf Pack warriors to exercise caution, remain vigilant



Photo by Senior Airman Lanie McNeal, 8th CS/VI

Protest demonstrations occur throughout the Republic of Korea and increased numbers tend to be linked to depressed economic conditions and warmer temperatures. Local protest groups demonstrate for various reasons to include dissatisfaction over the economy, job layoffs and the current Status of Armed Forces agreement. Kunsan Air Base experiences protests every Friday. While most protests are peaceful demonstrations, the local Air Force Office of Special Investigation Detachment commander warns the Wolf Pack to remain vigilant and avoid all demonstrations.

By Capt. Chris Karns
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Fists pumping and shouts of “Yankee go home” filling the air is a common scene across the peninsula. Armed with rocks, bottles and picket signs, a small segment of the Korean populace regularly participates in weekly demonstrations protesting against the nearly 37,000 U.S. forces stationed at military installations peninsula-wide.

The reasons behind organized demonstrations vary. In the past, news reports cited dissatisfaction with the current Status of Forces Agreement, alleged encroachment on Korean farmland and alleged U.S. military contamination of the environment as concerns.

While others state Americans have worn out their welcome.

For years, Kunsan Air Base and other U.S. military installations on the peninsula have experienced scheduled, scripted and mostly peaceful weekly protests outside its gates.

At Kunsan, regularly scheduled protests led by Korean minister, Mun, Chong-Hyon, have occurred since 1997.

Kunsan protests usually occur Fridays from 2-4 p.m. at the installation’s main gate.

The local demonstrators protest against American military force presence, SOFA revisions, reparation for U.S. military use of Korean land, relocation of the Wolf Pack munitions storage area and alleged U.S. Forces Korea environmental pollution, among others issues, said Maj. Bo Schupp, Air Force Office of Special Investigation Detachment 613 commander.

In an attempt to bring legitimacy to their cause, Mun and other local protest groups join together and recruit other people to support them, making a small group

look larger, more organized and more powerful.

In fact, the Kunsan demonstration is usually one of several sites this group protests against on Fridays, Schupp said.

“This is a give and take situation,” Schupp said. “Many of the protestors support (Mun) in exchange for supporting their demonstrations. Most of the protestors don’t dislike or have a problem with Americans, they just realize that larger numbers draw greater attention, and they need the numbers to help fight their cause. If you take all those people out of the equation, we only have about 40 protestors.”

Mun tends to recruit from companies experiencing layoffs such as Kia Steel Company, Daewoo Motors, Ikson Glass and the KaeJong medical center. They travel across the peninsula staging rallies and making arrangements to support one another’s causes, said Ku, Song-Kil, AFOSI Detachment 613 Korean investigator and counter intelligence specialist.

“When the economy is not doing well and the weather is good, expect more protestors,” Ku said. “Protests are very dependent on (South Korea’s) economic situation.”

With warmer weather, Korean universities nearing semester’s end and the summer months ahead, protests are again expected to increase in size and possibly severity, thus posing an increased threat risk to troops stationed on the peninsula.

“These demonstrations pose a very real threat to U.S. military servicemembers across the peninsula,” said Col. Philip Breedlove, 8th Fighter Wing commander. “Although we have an outstanding relationship with our Korean friends, there is a very small segment of people who are capable of causing harm to our people. People need to remain vigilant and take the threats seriously.”

Extra precautionary measures are taken to ensure

safety. A three-to-one ratio of Korean National Police is one example, Schupp said. In addition, 8th Fighter Wing security forces and OSI special agents remain ready inside the military installation fences.

“Usually the protests are scripted and very well orchestrated,” Schupp said. “It’s like going to the opera, following the program and knowing what’s coming next.”

However, despite strong security measures and a “script”, the local AFOSI detachment commander warns U.S. troops to exercise caution and expect the unexpected especially when it comes to local student groups, such as those from Namchon-yon. The Namchon-yon student groups have a history of being more violent than regular protest groups.

“The students are more active and more violent,” Schupp said. “They tend to push and shove and throw paint, eggs, shoes, bottles and garbage. They throw anything they can get their hands on. The key to remaining safe is avoidance. Know when a protest is scheduled to happen and stay away...If you’re at the wrong place at the wrong time, you may get hurt. Therefore, remain alert and avoid unfamiliar areas.”

The 8th FW commander warns troops not to let the actions of a few negative protestors color opinion toward the Republic of Korea and its people collectively.

“The overwhelming majority of our Korean friends appreciate what we do and our presence on the peninsula,” Breedlove said. “These people have a right to protest. We can be proud that we’ve conducted ourselves professionally and have done nothing wrong. We can’t allow a few protestors, many of which are joining protests only to gain support for another cause, to skew our perception of Korea as a whole. However, we do need to remain professional and alert at all times.”